Thayer

2 Thayer

Oldest in point of service of the Plume and Atwood Company employees is Harry Thayer, who retired last spring after working for the concern for more than fifty four years. Mr. Thayer's 35 acre farm, on which he has lived most of his life, is located in the windswept hill country immediately beyond High street, known disrespectfully as “Cracker Hill,” and from the eminence of his hilltop home he commands an imposing view of the community. He takes advantage of this situation to remark jocularly that he doesn't think much of the local aristocracy, and that as a matter of fact, he is probably the only man in town who “can look down on 'em.” He is proud being the oldest living employee, clings to the designation obdurately, though he no longer works.

“Worked there 54 years, five months and six days when I had to quit last May,” he says. “Had a couple of shocks, one right after the other, and I can't use my right arm so good any more. Whole right side was paralyzed there for a while, but it's coming back gradually. I can still do a little around the farm, and I can hitch up and drive the horse. Hope I'll never see the day when I'm so helpless I can't do that. But I can't drive nails worth a damn any more. There was a time when I could drive 'em with the best man that ever lived, if I say it myself. Shouldn't be bragging, I suppose.” [C. B. Conn?]

Mr. Thayer's education has been better than average, and his diction in uncommonly good. He explains that he attended Gunnery prep school in Washington, but was forced by the death 2 of his father to forego further schooling at the age of fifteen.

“My dad was a hotel man. And a good one. He ran hotels all over country. One in San Francisco, one in Keokuk, Ioway, and in other cities in the west. Then he came east, and started in this section. Ran one in Naugatuck for a while, then came up here and took

over the Thomaston House. My mother helped him, and I went to school, and he got Jim Chatfield to tend bar for him after he got the license, because in those days there was no sense trying to run a hotel without liquor.

“He died from overwork. He worked hard and he worked late, and he had a lot of vitality, but it was too much for him at last. Things were tough for my mother and me after he went, trying to run the place. But we stuck it out for two years before we sold out.

“Then I went in the mill. Got the job through old Mr. D. S. Plume, he used to be president of the company. Used to eat his lunch at the hotel, old D. S. did, and that's how I got acquainted with him.

“Started me in the overhauling room at a dollar and a half a day. A. J. Grilley was superintendent. Stayed in the overhauling room a year, and then Mr. Grilley put me in the packing room. And that was a relief, because I never liked the overhauling room. Work was very crude in those days, very crude. Everything done by hand. It was so crude they used 3 to cut metal in five feet lengths and run it through the rolls, and the only measurement they had was a pin or a chalk line on the floor.

“They only had one drying out machine. And they shoved the metal in the muffles by hand from the front—twenty men on a side—and drew it out by hand. Now they've got a machine, puts the metal in from the rear, draws it through by chain power regulated from above. They used to do all the cutting by hand, now they've got a cutting up machine. There's no end to the improvements. And of course the mill hasn't gone as far as some of the bigger concerns in the installation of new methods.

“They've got a new roll for the rich metal—Rich metal? That's metal with more copper, a better quality brass. It's used for jewelry. Good money in rolling, though I never did it. How do they break 'em in? Why it's just a case of learning and experience. Probably start a

man on the breaking down rolls-that's the first operation in rolling—and let him work for a while. They put a good roller with a beginner, that's the way they teach 'em.

“But I spent most of my time in the packing room. After I'd worked there five years, they discharged the boss. Nothing was said about hiring anybody else, and I just went along and did his work and my own too. But they didn't give me any more money. Paid me a dollar seventy five cants a day—quarter more than I got to start with. After a while I see they weren't going to do anything about it and I went to Mr. Plume. I said, ‘Look here Mr. Plume, I'm doing two men's work down there in the packing room, and I don't see any more money. Now‘ I said, ’what's the answer, do I get two dollars a day, or do I make 4 a change?‘ He said, “Well, Harry, I'll have to talk it over with Grilley, you wait a while.’ And a few days later I saw him, and he said ‘How would ten cents more suit you?’ I said, ‘No, Mr. Plume, I happen to know the other fella was making his two dollars, and I think I'm a better man than he was, and I'm doing his work and mine too. Now,’ I says, ‘if you can't see your way clear to giving me the two dollars, I think I can do better somewhere else.’ He says, ‘Well, wait, don't be impatient.’ A few days later he sent word I could have the raise.

“He was a pretty good old man. They've always been good people to work for. I could've gone back to work after I'd had my shock. They would've taken me back. But I decided I had enough. I got the farm to look after here, and I have a fella come in to work by the day, and it keeps me pretty busy. Kept a couple of horses until I got sick. Now I only got the one. You ever see me driving the sorrel and the black?

“When I first came up here I had the finest stable in town, If I do say so myself. Six horses, and they were beauties. I sold a couple to Dr. Forman up in Torrington first cousin of mine.

“Tried to teach him how to drive, but he never could learn. He just wasn't a horseman. He was a little bit of a man. I'm short, but he was shorter yet. And those horses turned out to be the death of him.

“His wife practiced medicine too. She wanted to study after they got married, and he was against it, but finally he 5 sent her out west and she got her degree. Came back and practiced in women's and children's diseases.

“Well, as I was saying those horses were the death of him. He always had a hired man to drive him, but one night he had to make a trip to Terryville and the man wasn't around. So he went out and hitched up the pair himself and started, against his wife's advice. Last he was seen was in the Austin House just before he started home. He asked if anyone there would drive him, and how much they wanted, and a fella at the bar said he'd take him up for three dollars. 'three dollars, says my cousin, ‘Why you ought to pay me for letting you drive a pair of horses like I've got out there.’

“So he went out, and that's the last he was seen alive. His wife was worried from the time he'd left, so of course when he didn't come back in a reasonable time, she got up a party to go look for him. They found the off horse coming along with part of the wreckage behind him, and farther on they came to a wooden bridge. And there was the white horse in a ditch with a broken neck. And up the road a bit was my uncle's body with his head crushed in. He never could drive, poor fella.

“But I've always had horses. Only time I ever was without a horse was when I went to school at the Gunnery, and then I did plenty of riding on hired horses. Since they've discontinued the road past my place here it's a bit tricky getting down to the main highway, but I can do it. I had that lane cut through for just that purpose years ago. Figured they might discontinue the main road some day. They wanted to hard surface the lane for me, but I says if you do you'll 6 claim it, and I don't care for that idea. I like my privacy here.

“You see that house to the north up there, and all that pasture land. That was Mr. French's farm, president of the company. He came from farming stock. His people had a place up on Walnut Hill. And he came in the mill as a caster and worked up to what he is now. He ran the old place over there for a hobby, but he gave it up a number of years ago.

“Fine man and a fine business man, Mr. French. He takes a deep interest in whatever goes on in the plant. He knows every department, and he gives his personal attention to all kinds of details. You know these Westclox people that bought out Seth Thomas? We used to make brass for their plant out west. We got complaint after complaint. Finally Mr. French went out there to find out what was wrong. They went through a rigamarole of some kind, but he saw they were just interested in making complaints without any good reason.

“So he said, ‘We make a pretty good grade of brass, and we make it for quite a few companies, but we get more complaints from you people than from any six of our other customers. From now on,’ he says, ‘you can take your business somewhere else. We don't want it. ‘And that's all there was to that. He told me that himself. And that's the kind of people you've got running your Seth Thomas clock factory today.

“He's a topnotch business man. And another good man is Billy Byers. The superintendent. I remember him when he came to work, just in from the old country. He wore a rough, checked shirt and corduroy pants and a celluloid collar. But 7 he was smart. They were beginning to build on at that time, and Chatfield, the boss joiner was in charge of the work. Bill Byers was just pushing a wheelbarrow. I remember they were having trouble of some kind with their blueprints and Billy came along and looked over Chatfield's shoulder. ‘that ain't right,’ he says. Chatfield looked around, and he says, ‘If you know so much about it, show me where I'm wrong.

“And Billy did. He was an accountant, or something, over in Scotland. He knew figures. From that time on Chatfield took a fancy to him, and he went up in the world.

“And there's one thing you might mention, if you write anything about Plume and Atwood. They always say in this section, It's the barometer of the brass business. If business is good at P and A, the brass business will pick up all around. And vice versa. Not Chase's,

nor American Brass, nor any of the rest, young fella, but little old Plume and Atwood. The barometer of the brass business."